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DRAMATIC CRITICISM.

BY BRAM STOKER, M. A.

THE ultimate importance of dramatic criticism is shown in the amount of space allotted to theatrical matters in the journals of the day. It is the duty of newsmongers to supply the want of the public, and it may be fairly taken for granted that if there were no demand the supply, even if continued, would not have a perpetual growth. In both England and America there is on every great newspaper some official to whom is entrusted the collection and editing of theatrical news. In America this individual has a definite position as "dramatic editor." His work is aided, if not simplified, by the existence of the "press agent," now generally attached to every prominent theatre, who supplies to him items of interest presumed to be of importance by the advance agent of what is known as an "attraction." Thus it will be seen that in this great mass of theatrical material, chiefly composed of exchange matter, rumor, and gossip, there is a special need that the judgment set forth as that of the newspaper itself, through its experts, should be accurate and adequate. It is the critical little leaven which is to leaven the whole lump. This is not only possible, but easy, of achievement, since the multiplying of the necessary number of writers leaves the critic proper to attend to his own work, whilst the dramatic editor and his staff do all that may be required in the way of making straight the path of the coming players. In fact the critical Dr. Jekyll need have no connection with the rumor-bearing Mr. Hyde.

What, then, should be the equipment of a dramatic critic and his intellectual attitude whilst addressing himself to his task, it being taken for granted that he must obey all those rules which the experience of ages has formulated for the guidance of critics generally, whilst at the same time he gives special heed to those

other rules, dependent on the *differentia* of dramatic as distinguished from other art ?

Ordinarily a critic should have primarily a sympathetic understanding of the matter on which he sits in judgment :

A perfect judge will read each work of wit
With the same spirit that its author writ.

How much more necessary is this spirit when that which the critic reads is writ in tone and action on a page of passing emotion—all as swift and evanescent as a wind-sweep across still water. And yet there are here and there to be found writers, who take so harsh, so illiberal, or so jaundiced a view of their high calling that, to use Fielding's phrase, they construe the Greek word for criticism in its legal sense only—condemnation, instead of judgment. The arts are liberal, and from their very essence require not only a tolerant understanding of their aim and method, but a generous appreciation of even their lesser efforts and their minor issues. The world would be but a poor place after all were it not for the arts ; and it is a poor art indeed which cannot tend toward the advancement of some ideal. That artist is indeed low down in the scale of human excellence whose labors do not brighten and beautify, or at least soften the harshness of things. Of all the arts, that of acting requires the most sympathetic understanding ; for, though the means of its expression are of the subtlest, being through the exercise of the powers of God's last work—man, its happenings are so quick and so impalpable that before they can be well exposed to the influence of foreign judgment their very memory is temporarily obliterated by the exercise and purpose of succeeding emotions. It is here that some understanding of the actor's intention becomes of importance ; for unless the judge either has some previous knowledge of it, or allows his own sympathy to move as freely as its subject, it can hardly be possible for him to grasp the idea of a consistent character working always through one individuality, and yet subject to varied passions and emotions. But the dramatic critic has to study, follow, absorb not only one character under varying aspects and conditions, but each and every character in the play ; so that if his brain be already loaded with theories, and if his sympathies be already choked with antagonistic purposes, he is little apt to arrive at that great truth,

whatever it may be, at which the actor and the audience are conjointly aiming. In this matter of quickening sympathy the best lesson in criticism comes from the audience whose swift and accurate judgment is shown every now and again by the spontaneous cheer, which shakes the playhouse and justifies in a way the action of that gifted scribe who, crystallizing public sentiment, first turned enthusiasm into an active verb. And yet there are instances of men who seem completely blind to the value of sympathy in criticism, and approach the matter in a seemingly hostile spirit. I know, for instance, of one dramatic critic—dramatic critic and translator of plays—either so perversely stupid or so lamentably ignorant of the very first principles of his calling as to write thus : “The actor, however little he may like to be told so, is a parasite upon the play.” If his statement were metaphysically true, what a slur he, a critic, has cast by inference upon his craft ; for if the actor be a parasite upon the play, what, in the name of logic, is the critic, who earns his bread or pursues his mission by writing of the actor ?

Great fleas have little fleas upon their backs to bite 'em,
Little fleas have lesser fleas and so *ad infinitum*.

“It is a dirty bird,” says the old English proverb, “which fouls its own nest.”

Again, the critic of the drama should have at least some special knowledge of the subject of his work, unless, of course, he be one of those gifted individuals whose omniscience is intuitive, or he have that which must not be expected of any man, a sufficient modesty to hide his own ignorance. For the dramatic critic has to judge not only the player, but the play ! and a play is a mightily complicated piece of work. As it has to appeal to all or most of the senses, it has everywhere a bearing on some branch of human knowledge, since the eye has to be pleased and satisfied, beauty as well as accuracy has to be observed, and the production of a play in an educated age is no light task. In external scenes the flora of place and season have to be correctly given—the scene painter who knows his work must even study the characteristics of cloud and atmosphere. The historical period, the nationality, and the social degrees of all concerned have to be accurately shown ; even the habits and bearing of an age and country are of importance. These things all mean very special study somewhere,

and when painters and historians have carefully collaborated with management and actors, it requires a learned critic to be able either to fully appreciate or to justly condemn what is shown. The spread of archæology has been mainly aided by the stage, for it has been by the wholesale setting forth of the environment of a period or an event that the great public has come to have familiar knowledge of such matters. In such a mass of material as a stage setting requires it is comparatively easy to find a flaw; but this is a very different thing from the conception of even a crude idea upon the subject. It is, I think, hardly too much to say that it will take the most superior judgment to be found in England or America to fitly and fully appreciate the work of a great play properly produced, so as to enable the writer to translate and point out its excellences to the vast body of the—incompletely—educated public.

Let me here say that, speaking with a considerable knowledge of dramatic criticism and dramatic critics in both England and America, I can bear willing testimony to their general worth. I have found them to be, as a body, earnest, liberal-minded gentlemen, sympathetic in their attitude toward the work, patient and fearless in their discharge of it, having no private purpose or end of their own to serve, but helping to enlarge the public sympathy and to purify the public taste by their appreciation of excellences and their condemnation of evil things.

So far, however, as we are informed, neither is there any special supply of heavenly fire to enlighten dramatic critics, nor are they or their body specially exempt from the evils that assail mankind. All callings have their less worthy or unworthy members, and the ranks of dramatic criticism have no special immunity from such. Further than this, it is probable that this body has more than its fairshare of undesirable individuals, since there is no preliminary test of capability. The calling is an open one, needing necessarily no qualifications except the will of a newspaper proprietary. Thus there are to be found, here and there, fortunately at rare intervals, in the body of dramatic critics, as in all bodies, members of the criminal class, of the asylum class, of the hospital class—in fact of that class generally of cranks and faddists, whose place in the world of criticism is somewhat analogous to that occupied in the scheme of law by what are known as “torts,” a class of civil offences, with a possible criminal bias.

The distinctly criminal class is represented by a few individuals who are venal to the praise of unworthiness, and who have a blacker side of crime in that they extort, where and how they can, blackmail in money or in "meal or malt" by either disseminating or withholding libel. These men are but few ; and as they are pretty well known to every one in the theatrical and journalistic world, I cannot but think that an organized effort for their suppression by the men whose craft they sully would have an immediate and wholesome effect.

The critics of the hospital and asylum classes are harmless unless when they have some personal interest to serve, some spite to indulge, or some wound to their vanity to avenge : in such case, the pity which the reader of average intelligence has for them changes to a purposeful contempt. These cases are, however, rare ; for as a rule the dramatic critic whose existence is built on vanity or *cacoethes scribendi*, or both, is harmless and is fully sheltered by the magnitude of his own incapacity.

Finally, the class of cranks or faddists includes certain varieties whose differentiation is a matter of almost entomological interest. The most common specimen is that of the "provincial" writer. This individual is gifted with a sort of impregnable cocksureness, and to him nothing is hidden, for he reads the whole Arcana like an open book. His logic being of the purely feminine order—"I think ; therefore I know"—has to him no possible flaw, for his vanity supplies the blanks that his ignorance has passed, and his self-sufficiency covers up with a blinding glory all doubts as to fact. In some of the most intellectual centres of the English-speaking world such specimens are to be found, and it is to them that the word "provincial" can be most suitably applied. "Provincial" as an adjective is not geographical, but comparative. It implies a narrowness of vision or an intolerance of spirit tacitly taken to arise from inadequate experience. To eyes accustomed to the eternal passing of the great pageant of life the various items have only the importance of their place in the great scheme ; but to eyes not so trained by habit each item seen by itself becomes of undue importance ; and, inasmuch as lesser towns but seldom see these greater movements of the world, the opportunity of comparison does not exist in a measure sufficiently large to become of permanent educational value. Thus the comparison of a "provincial" with a "capital" view of things

becomes instructive, and we are enabled to fairly test the intellectual value of those who, though enjoying the opportunities of larger culture, find themselves—or rather are found by their readers—eternally limited by their provincial littleness. The work of a “provincial” critic speaks for itself, and who runs may read the signs. For such a man loves to display his knowledge, and the sum of human knowledge is so great, and the amount of it which one person can acquire is so small, that the measure of his capacity can be gauged by the importance which he places on certain things which, though well known to others, are to him fraught with the weight of new acquirement. Thus, we may occasionally see an otherwise completely commonplace criticism speckled over with isolated chunks of the writer’s previously disintegrated ignorance. More commonly still one may notice comparisons made by such writers between existing things and others of which they are manifestly ignorant, and always to the detriment of the former. *Omne ignotum pro magnifico*. The most usual examples of this form of provincialism in dramatic criticism are those of comparison with foreign countries, as when American or British dramatic art is unfavorably compared with the glories of “the French and German schools,” or when players of the day are held up as wanting in the excellences of the actors of the past—Garriek and Kean being the most commonly chosen examples, since they are well known names, and none living has seen them play. The purveyors of the foreign comparison are usually to be found in inland towns or cities, where they have had life-long residence, and they are generally as ignorant of the French and German tongues as they are of Tamil or Telugu. Those gifted beings who are enabled to raise the veil from the past or to evolve from their own inner consciousness the minutiae of the art of Garriek and Kean—and the methods of these two players probably embraced the whole cycle of histrionic art—are as a rule either very young men without either thought or experience, or else more hardened sinners in the ways of conjecture and in the vice of self-esteem. In either case they are manifestly in absolute ignorance of the principles, the aims, the limitations, the difficulties and the practice of the art upon which they sit in judgment. They simply draw upon their inchoate imagination for their nebulous facts. Any one with experience or knowledge of individual writers of dramatic criticism will recognize the justice of this description

and easily identify, if such be worth while, the writers of this class.

As to the best method of achieving proper dramatic criticism on the part of those who are in all ways equipped for their work and perfectly unprejudiced in their desires, I should venture to suggest that in the case of a new play or an important revival of an old one the critic should not take as the field of his judgment the efforts of the first performance, when through the nervousness which is a necessary part of the artistic temperament many phases of effort are of necessity seen at their worst. He should wait until by a few repetitions the work of the various artists and operatives has been properly consolidated and smoothed. The occasion of a first performance is the opportunity for a descriptive reporter who can be eyes and ears to the reading public, rather than for the expert critic whose province it is to analyze and sit in judgment upon the play and the playing as seen by the great public during the progress of a run.

There is in the world no more honorable, no more responsible position for any man than to sit in judgment, and such an one should always feel the gravity and the weight of such an earnest task.

BRAM STOKER.